



Untitled(7.25.03)
Water-based pigments on gessoed canvas
65"hx65"w

OLIVER JACKSON

INTERVIEWED BY MARGARET PORTER TROUPE, DECEMBER 10, 2005

Born in 1935, Oliver Jackson is an extraordinary and prolific maker of paintings, sculpture, and mixed media works of art. Jackson taught as Professor of Art at California State University, Sacramento, for 32 years from 1971 to 2003, and served as visiting artist/artist in residence at a number of universities including Harvard University, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of California, Berkeley, University of Iowa, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, California College of Arts and Crafts Summer Institute at Aix-en-Provence and Paris, among others. Oliver Jackson's art works are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; The High Museum, Atlanta; Seattle Art Museum; St. Louis Art Museum; Portland Art Museum; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; and other major museums in the United States. What follows is excerpted from an interview conducted by telephone with Oliver Jackson in December, 2005.



Untitled (8-85)
1985, Marble with stainless steel and crayon
88"h x 44"w x 24.5"d



Untitled Bust IV (12.15.98)
pigment, mixed media
42"h x 18"w x 24.5"d

MPT: When did you realize that you were compelled to be a maker?

OJ: Very early. I was making things all the time prior to grade school. It was just the urge. When I was in my mid-20s, I understood my necessity to make things, regardless of profit or meaning. And making was not necessarily joyful; it was a burden at times, because it doesn't yield to practicality outside of itself — in terms of whether one could make money or be successful — and the necessity to do often came when I wanted not to do.

Again, I realized the futility of giving reasons for making.

OJ: Talent costs a great deal to develop and to practice, and having access to galleries and a population that is appreciative is rarely

MPT: In what sense?

OJ: Talent costs a great deal to develop and to practice, and having access to galleries and a population that is appreciative is rarely available to artists. Making is not a

priority in a community that needs health and its streets to be cleaned, and it is therefore difficult to be economically viable in one's community, and there is absolutely no need on the part of a white majority to economically embrace a different viewpoint in the United States that does not support their sense of reality. I thought talent and ability would be embraced because it existed, and of course that was naïve. Anyway, you need time to develop your vision and test your artistic skills in a professional way, but that doesn't produce an income, and still you have to buy supplies and pay your rent. So it became really difficult to get the right combination of things to fall into place. It was frustrating, and I yielded to the frustration by stopping.

MPT: And how were you supporting yourself before you gave up?

OJ: I didn't give up, I stopped! After I finished undergraduate school, I couldn't get a job in the visual arts. That was in the '50s. I worked in steel mills, boxcars, factories, all kinds of jobs, along with other African-American men. It wasn't unusual. Those jobs required intense physical labor. Then I was drafted into the Army, and the Army had little use for the visual arts. And so you feel out of place and useless. People say you have abilities, but there's almost no use for or reflection of this talent out in the world. That was very frustrating.

MPT: In the beginning, were you making all these kinds of different things?

OJ: I was concentrating on painting; however, I was also doing three-dimensional pieces, woodblocks, and prints. I rarely showed those works. Doing more than one medium strained the critics and the people who run the art world, to grasp what you 'really' do. The critics question your validity.

MPT: Your paintings on canvas are generally really large, 8 feet by 10 feet is normal, 8 feet by 8 feet, 8 feet by 9 feet. At that early stage, were you working on such a scale?

OJ: In the '50s, I was working 4x5, 5x6; that was large scale for me at that time. I also worked at smaller scale, about 18x24 inches, et cetera, but I preferred large scale. For me it was self-realization. In going to the museum in St. Louis, the paintings that attracted me were the larger paintings. Their effects fascinated me.

MPT: Which paintings fascinated you?

OJ: I remember particularly paintings with effects that were called Caravaggisti — after Caravaggio. The paint-

ings were impressive in their ability to make you feel you were in their space. For example, they have a tasteful Zurbaran painting, and an excellent small Rembrandt, both monumental in their effects. There are wonderful portraits by Northern painters, and also a really extraordinary El Greco. Even though those particular paintings were not large in scale, their effects were grand. I was intrigued by their compositional methods and harmonies, and I could see how these artists were able to make a completely authentic world, whether the size was 6 by 7 feet, or 3 by 5 inches.

MPT: So the paintings you were looking at were pretty much figurative?

OJ: Yes.

MPT: So, when you were making yours, were they figurative in the early stages, more figurative than they are now?

OJ: Yes, they were more figurative. However, I studied composition by using still lifes, which you can move around, and you can make puzzles and solve them. It's a good way to learn about compositional possibilities — tension, placement, design, space, et cetera.

MPT: So, how do you describe your work now?

OJ: Figurative is about the best I can do. However, 'figurative' does not make a lot of sense to me because it is a category that depends on representation for its meaning. And that's not what painting is for me — representation. Once you understand painting for what it is, then 'figurative' as a definition is not very clear. I do use figures as a foundation to make paintings. In the working sense, I use figure images as a starting point.

MPT: When you are ready to make something, do you decide in advance whether it's going to be a painting or a sculpture or a work on paper?

OJ: I make a conscious decision — absolutely — and it's a definitive decision in terms of the material and media. Much of the conceptual visual information is not making, but it is the genesis of the actual making, and is adjusted by the actual making process — the use of material. From the standpoint of: do I have clear-cut stuff in my head? Frequently, yes and no. What seems to be conceptually clear in actuality is often muddy. For instance, if you want to execute in wood, the wood may make demands that may not resemble what you envisaged as the piece in the first place. Making is a different reality.



Untitled(8.10.03)
2003, Water-based pigments on gessoed canvas
65"hx65"w

MPT: When I first saw one of your paintings, the thing that energized me in a very organic way was the color. And I wonder about color and you.

OJ: I do too [laughter]. For me, painting and color are inseparable. I came to understand the visual force of color. It is necessary to see color as structure and form, and fundamental to composition in painting.

MPT: There's sensuality in your painting, whether it is oil-based or water-based. How are you able to make that effect with watercolor? The color is so transparent but the image that comes through is heavy.

OJ: There is no contradiction between heaviness and lightness in the use of color, regardless of medium. You can make color effect weight, velocity, place, and space simultaneously. In my opinion, you must pay close attention to the effects that color is giving back to you, and you may get all of that. With color, I don't know what it cannot effect, in whatever medium.

MPT: When you are using paint and there is a figure, can you effectively make that figure something recognizable without a facility for drawing?

OJ: I don't see why you can't. When people are talking about drawing, they usually are talking about delineation by line to define shape. Color can separate quite clearly, and maybe more effectively than line. Color tends to give visual fullness that can be very distracting if you want to get certain precise information across, and color can overwhelm certain visual information. Makers frequently use drawing to work out certain aspects of a painting or sculpture. A great deal of drawing is informative and diagrammatic; however, on its own terms, drawing in itself is making, and in this obvious sense it is simply what it is, as it is. And seen in that light, it is complete, lacking nothing. The question becomes: 'Isn't drawing about linear marks, lines, or values?' And the answer, for me, is, 'no more than painting.'

MPT: How did growing up in St. Louis shape your vision?

OJ: St. Louis has a unique 'city' ambience. I lived in the African-American community, and that is a specific ambience within St. Louis. The African-American community informed me in its own 'sweet' particular way about love, friendship, harmony, human beings, aesthetics, et cetera. This early shaping was, and is, crucial to me. I am so pleased that I was able to feel and know things intimately — nothing between me and the feeling, and

knowing, and getting. The landscape contributed very much to my sense of scale in nature, and the Midwest is known for its dramatic weather changes — the power and visual strength as well as the physical strength associated with them. It is a watery place, not only because of the Mississippi, but the basin effect of the terrain and the humidity in the air — all these effects give an intimacy of what space is as volume: it is felt as humidity, and also seen as luminosity, that is, light is always passing through moisture. So a lot of those natural effects you absorb become a part of your sensibility.

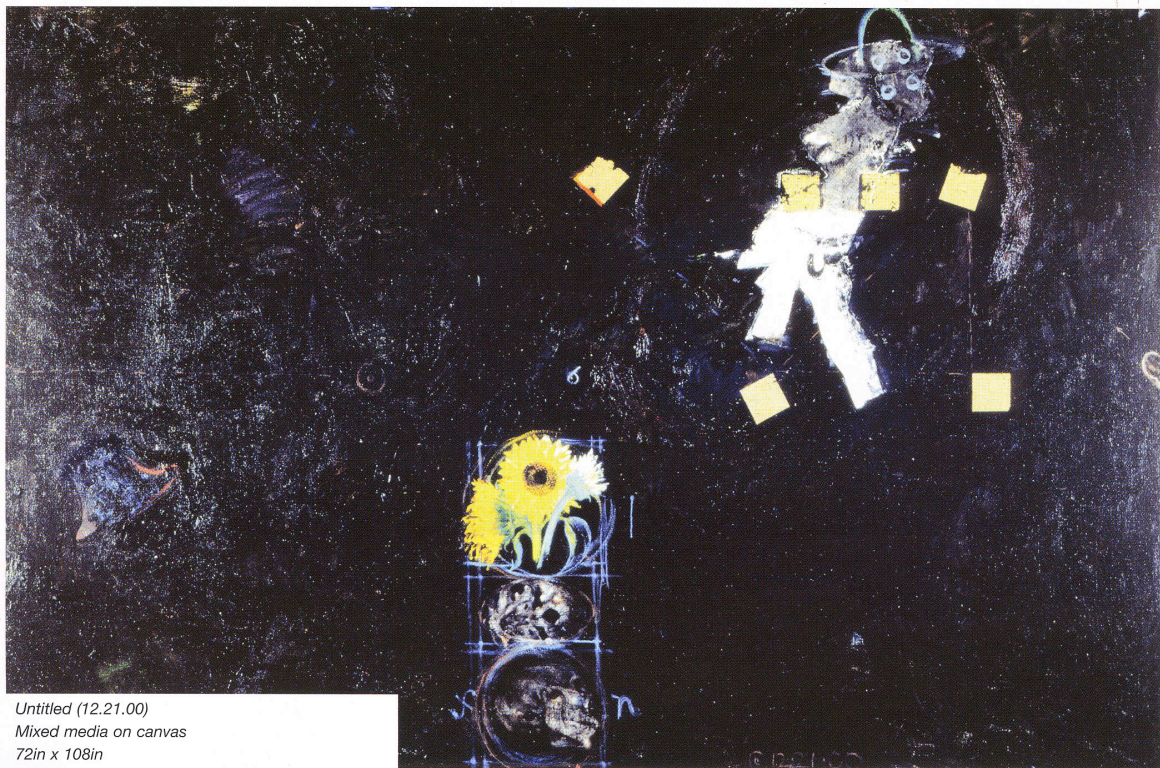
MPT: Oh, that's beautiful.

OJ: And, of course, there's my family. That part of the sensibility is most subtle; it is so personal and natural that you assume it's universal. It takes years to understand the 'unique' way your family engages in intimacy, and you love the way you share their sense of the private, the sacred, how they handle joy, and how they handle death. If you can draw on it, you can use it all. It does give you spiritual confidence about spiritual things. In other words, your rock is your authentic experiences, and not a dependence on experience explained to you from another paradigm.

MPT: Certain iconic images appear in your work. I wonder whether or not those visual images of those figures in the positions in which they appear in your art are in any way related to your St. Louis upbringing?

OJ: Well, not particularly. The thematic material is more or less an evolution image-wise, a particular kind of image reduced to a more efficient image gesturally. Over time, if you use particular gestures again and again, you tend to try to make them visually direct or more efficient. Now, how they arise is really obscure in a lot of ways. Some things can be pinpointed — you're literally drawing from things you've seen; however, even that becomes obscure in the sense that it evolves. I mean it's not a one-to-one relationship in my case. In other words, this is not a 'St. Louis kind' of image or derived from that place in its particularity. I hadn't thought about it. Remember, I've been in California for over 35 years, and in Oakland alone for over twenty. I'm not saying that this couldn't be the case (that the images that I use haven't derived their source from St. Louis), but I've been lots of places and it's an evolutionary process.

MPT: When you are making paintings and you are making sculptures do you approach them in the same way?



Untitled (12.21.00)
Mixed media on canvas
72in x 108in



Untitled(9.2.02)
Oil-based pigment, mixed media on canvas
84-78x119-3/4 inches

OJ: The approach is not the same in the way that you begin; however, your intentions are the same. What is interesting is how the demands of the material may have qualities and properties that you hadn't experienced or anticipated. And that can be a surprise to you. While you are pursuing a particular goal, the materials are making demands, and if you acquiesce to the material demands, they will change the work. It's an ongoing enlightenment and intimacy in the actual making process. You see things that you could not have seen conceptually or mentally — you change!

MPT: So when you begin, you have conscious goals about what it is you want to achieve?

OJ: Absolutely. And they are mental goals; they just get adjusted. The adjustment is sometimes so subtle that you may think that you haven't changed your goals, until you see the completed piece and the effect on you is not what you assumed. The work is not within the confines of your concept.

MPT: What might be some of the goals that you might want to achieve in a particular work?

OJ: I intend the work to have power, and I want the power to be specific in terms of its effects. It's like being in a summer storm; it resonates you differently than a winter storm. They're both powerful, and they have powerful effects; however, a powerful effect is not necessarily disturbing in terms of violating anything, but the



Untitled(11.23.00)
Mixed-media on canvas
96 in x 96 in



Untitled(6.8.03)
2003, Oil-based pigments, mixed media on linen
72x84 inches

experience is able to fix you and resonate you and get your attention in a strong way.

MPT: How do you know when you have achieved that goal?

OJ: The work resonates me. But how it resonates me has to do with me. It's like every vessel gets resonated uniquely. The power can be there, but the resonance for me, and how it would effect me, would be different than for you, because we're two different vessels.

MPT: What impact did teaching have on your work, in terms of how you make work; or did it?

OJ: Yes, it did. The effect it had was to make me want to ensure the work's physicality — to try for strong physical effects. The students did not come with a strong sense for the physical in making; they resisted becoming intimate with the world in a sensual way. They preferred an abstract understanding of physicality, and at the same time, ironically, they were put off by visual abstraction. Representation they loved, and referential imagery; however, they didn't want representation to get in their face, or physically get in their space. It's like they could accept that something should look heavy, but not feel heavy.

MPT: Feel, as in emotionally or psychically?

OJ: Feel, literally. Students don't expect to be overly or excessively impressed, or physically excited by artistic visual works. I suspect the reason for their responses is the Puritanism that imposes its spirit upon the visual arts. And I think that it makes for a restraint that is not necessarily aesthetic. However, in the field of the fine arts, aesthetics and physicality hang out together all the time. Dealing with this in teaching, again, reinforced my own personal feeling for physicality. I mean, you must embrace the physical world, and you do, whether you do it in a weak way or a full way, when you make something. From my own African-American orientation, physicality is a friend.

MPT: A lot of artists title their work; you do not.

OJ: Titles deflect attention away from the work to a kind of 'story.' If the viewers attach themselves to a title concept that appears to be reinforced by the work, more fundamental things that are the work are not paid attention to.

MPT: Who for you are some of the artists you consider the most effective, most powerful makers?

OJ: I like the work of Vermeer, Rembrandt, the Russian icon makers, the Buli Master, the Master of the Pieta d'Avignon, David Smith, Pippin, many others. For instance, I like Rubens, but I don't care for him in the same way I care for Goya. I don't choose Rubens because of my sensibility, but I can see in his work how stunning he is in his ability to orchestrate an intimate world — nobody does it better. And if you stand with him, whether you like that world or not, you become intimate with it.

MPT: Do you do a lot of looking at contemporary art today?

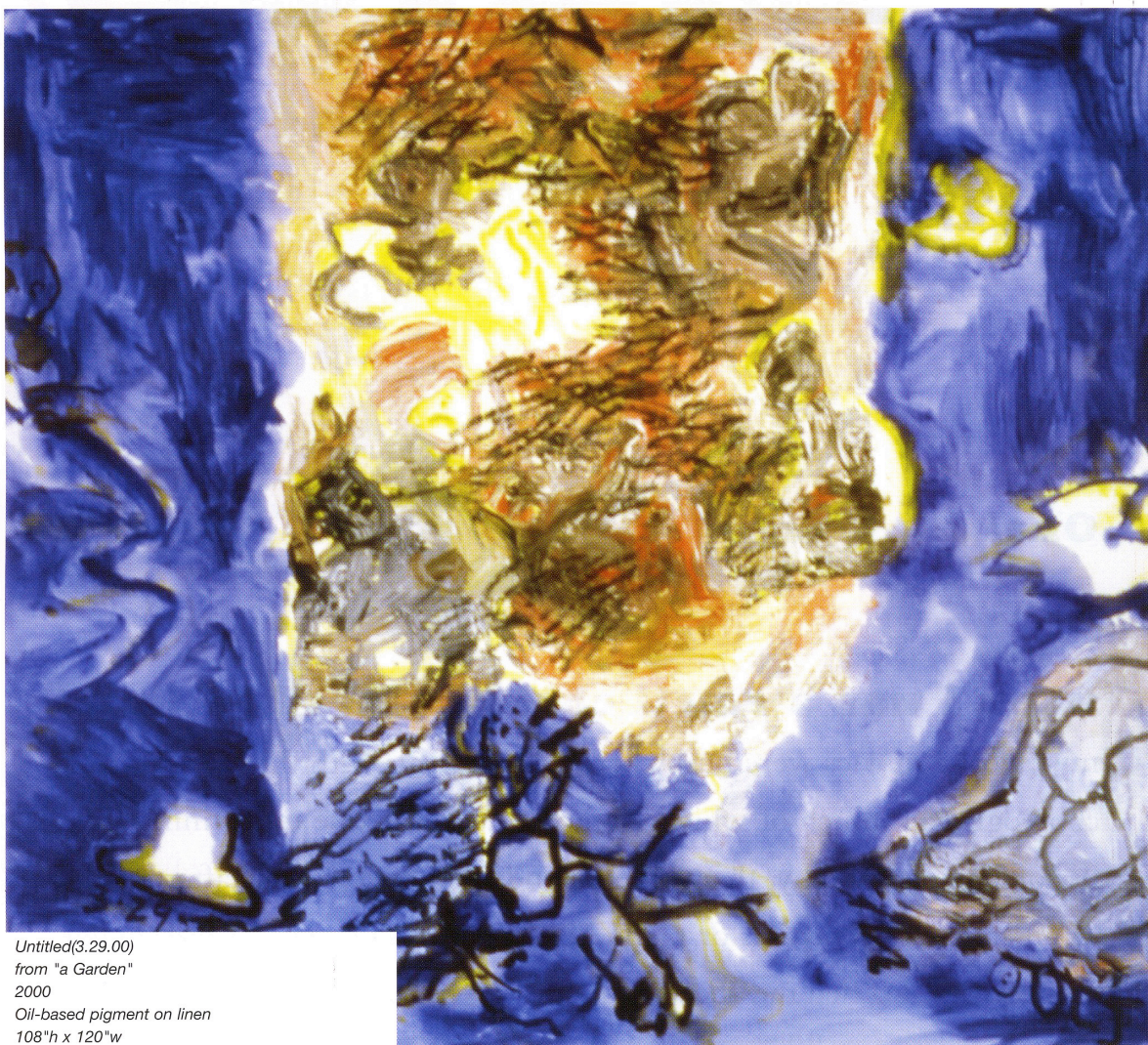
OJ: Not as much as I used to. At this point in time, I don't keep up in the same way I would have, say 30 or 35 years ago. Many of the things that are being done are very interesting to me, but I'm not going to be doing them and I don't want to be distracted. At the same time, you want to stay alert and aware of what's going on around you, and I certainly do that.

MPT: I wanted to know about your relationship with music; how it informs your work.

OJ: Because of my relationships with music and musicians, I began to understand how I could approach making something, starting with the first mark, the very first mark — that choice. The musicians I was listening to seemed to be direct and powerful whether or not they were playing soft, gentle, or with volume. They might begin very, very softly, touching silence tenderly, or harshly. In doing either, they never seemed to violate the silence. That's what I was trying to do, to master, in making — directness. Directness is personal; to be direct is to be yourself; to be yourself is to know yourself. So then I began to understand myself as a maker. I taught myself to use myself and to be true to my own mistakes, the mistakes that grew out of how I did things. I learned how to resolve the mistakes out of myself. I was fortunate to be intimate with musicians like Julius Hemphill, and Oliver Lake, and other great musicians, and from them you get imbued with this love of beauty. You learn to yield to beauty, and that has helped me to be very confident in my sense of aesthetics. Yes, music and musicians informed me a lot.

MPT: What do you want people to know about your work?

OJ: That's a difficult question. That it just is what it is. That it exists and is there for them to experience. That's not knowing about the work, that's its being. So I don't know if I want them to know anything.



Untitled(3.29.00)
from "a Garden"
2000
Oil-based pigment on linen
108"h x 120"w